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Modern French Tapestries

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Foreword

In 1947 the Arts Council showed a small exhibition of the tapestries of Lurçat at one town in England. This served as an introduction to the interesting development in tapestry design and manufacture taking place in France to-day, and it followed closely on the unique and historical exhibition of 'French Tapestry' that was shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum that same year. Since then there have been several exhibitions of modern tapestries, notably that of the works of Saint-Saëns and Lurçat at the Anglo French Art Centre and another exhibition of Lurçat at Gimpel Fils, both in the autumn of 1948. It is thanks to the Anglo French Art Centre, and its Director, Mr Rozelaar Green, that the Council can now show in six places a more comprehensive exhibition, in which works of many of the outstanding designers have been included. Thanks are also due to the *Association des Peintres Cartonniers* who helped with the selection.

Modern French Tapestries

Introduction

France is witnessing to-day a remarkable revival in the art of tapestry, a revival which is largely due to the artistic sensibility, the energy and administrative ability of one man, Jean Lurçat, three of whose tapestries are now exhibited here.

To speak of a revival implies a decline and there was indeed a lamentable debasement of this great and noble art, for which France has been justly famed for six hundred years, during the nineteenth century and the early years of the present century. France has always excelled in this lovely craft and in the art of painting, but it was the very impact of painting which brought about the violation of the fundamental technique and a disregard for the true nature of tapestry. If the gradual decadence was at first offset by the magnificence and grandeur of conception which characterises paintings which serve as models, the subservience of the artist and the degradation of the art itself became complete.

The nature of tapestry is governed by its function as a mural decoration on a large scale, the use of wool as its material basis, and, arising from these two requirements, a limitation in the number of colours and a vigour and boldness in design with no attempt to adopt the trickery of perspective and modelling in light and shade on which a life-like imitation of external appearances depends.

Those who visited the exhibition of French tapestries held in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1947, in which were assembled many of the finest pieces from France, will have recognised how immeasurably superior are the Gothic tapestries by virtue of their obedience to these principles. In the *Apocalypse* from Angers there are no more than about twenty different shades used and the passage from bright to dark is achieved with only three different tones. By the time of the foundation of the famous Gobelins and Beauvais factories in 1662 and 1664 the number of shades had risen to 120 under the influence of the painter Le Brun who directed the industry. As the eighteenth century proceeded the figure rose to as many as 30,000. Every nuance, every brushstroke in the painter's cartoon had to be slavishly copied; the weaver no longer exercised any freedom in interpreting the design. During the course of the nineteenth century the art reached its lowest depths, for not only were paintings still slavishly

copied, but the paintings themselves were of a deplorable standard.

After the first world war various desultory attempts were made to capture the interest of some of the more original contemporary artists. However, it was not until 1933 that an important step forward was taken when Madame Cuttoli commissioned a group of artists of the School of Paris to provide cartoons which were woven at Aubusson. Picasso, Dufy, Braque, Rouault, provided oil paintings which, exquisitely worked to give the infinitesimal of tone characteristic of this medium, turned out as charming pictures in wool-work. Miro and Lurçat alone provided true cartoons.

From 1938 onwards Lurçat, who for many years had been interested in the weaver's craft, produced a series of tapestries all more or less centred on the theme of the cock, both at Aubusson and at the Gobelins factory. His cartoons and those of other artists working with him, Saint-Saëns, Coutaud, Picart le Doux (examples of whose work are included in this exhibition) and others, were now realised, but Lurçat was determined that the new venture should be a reincarnation of the craftsmanship of the great epochs and that there should be a return from easel-painting to the loom.

If his art owes something of its individual quality to the preceding styles of cubism and surrealism, he here returns wholeheartedly to nature, inventing a new vocabulary whose symbols and metaphors are of a richness reminiscent of the middle ages. Sometimes, of course, his language has the harshness of the world in which we live; and if, like Picasso, the murder of defenceless towns is so deeply burnt into his consciousness that some of his themes are influenced by such happenings, his usual motifs, his exquisite colours and his poetic imagery derive, above all, from a rediscovery of nature.

For whom, it is often asked, are such tapestries made in these days of smaller houses and slender purses? To anyone responsible for the furnishing of government or municipal buildings, schools, banks, restaurants or offices, they must surely commend themselves as something which will give perpetual delight to those who enter these buildings or work in them. It is good to know that the foundations of a revival on similar lines are now being laid in Edinburgh. It must not fail for want of patronage.

PHILIP JAMES

Catalogue

LUCIEN COUTAUD

1 Snow · 9′ 4″×2′ 4″

2 The Harp · 8′ 5″×4′ 3″

HELÈNE DETROYAT

3 The Dormouse · 5′ 2″×6′ 9″

MARCEL GROMAIRE

4 Aubusson · 9′ 10″×9′ 6″

5 Birds of Prey · 5′ 11″×6′ 6″

VINCENT GUIGNEBERT

6 La Belle Irma · 6′ 4″×4′ 9″

7 The Fisherman from Ostend · 6′ 4″×4′ 9″

ROBERT HENRY

8 Perpetual Motion · 6′ 6″×4′ 1″

JACQUES LAGRANGE

9 The Fishing Net · 6′ 6″×9′ 10″

JEAN LURÇAT

10 The Four Corners · 7′ 6″×10′

11 The Armchair · 5′ 8″×6′ 7″

12 The Cock of the Day · 5′ 3″×4′ 2″

JEAN PICART LE DOUX

13 Harlequin · 6′ 6″×4′ 11″

14 Cosmogony · 5′ 7″×6′ 10″

DOM ROBERT

15 The Creation of Man · 13′×11′ 1″

MARC SAINT-SAËNS

16 Theseus and Minotaur · 9′ 6″×16′ *Collection Jansen*

17 Mountebanks · 8′×5′

18 Sunflowers and the Rain · 6′ 10″×9′ 2″

TAL COAT

19 The Cocks · 5′ 11″×9′ 6″

MICHEL TOURLIÈRE

20 The Lace Net 5′ 1″×9′ 2″

ROBERT VOGENSKI

21 Music · 7′ 2″×4′ 7″

22 Dance · 7′ 2″×4′ 7″

Other Arts Council Exhibitions

20th Century British and French Bookbinding

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Gordon Craig · Theatre Designs and Engravings

Henry Moore Drawings

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